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ABSTRACT

A comparison of the educational attainment of white natives and children of white immigrants in the United States for a 90-year period from 1890 to 1980 indicates that the higher achievement of the children of immigrants has been a general phenomenon over several decades. Natives are defined as American-born with American-born parents; children of immigrants have one or more foreign-born parent. Statistical data were analyzed from the United States Census. Due to variations in the collection of census data, only Caucasian students were analyzed. The following findings are reported: (1) the school enrollment of children of immigrants exceeded that of natives, although the separation narrowed between 1900 and 1970; (2) rates of educational attainment for both groups were similar in 1950 but the educational attainment of children of immigrants increased over time and at higher educational levels; and (3) children of immigrants tended to have higher acceleration rates and lower retention rates than natives, suggesting higher proportions of superior-achieving students among immigrants' children. These findings appear to cast doubt on theories of cultural discontinuity, and to suggest that the effects of cultural discontinuity may be more social than academic in nature. Educators and the general public do not appear to be aware of the high levels of educational attainment that have been characteristic of the children of white immigrants, a fact that has resulted in inappropriate educational policies and a research focus on the failures of immigrant children. A list of 45 references and 4 tables of statistical data are appended. (FMW)

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The Educational Attainment of Children of Immigrants

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Immigration in the United States in the past several years has reached the same levels as the period of peak immigration in 1910: nearly one million per year since the late 1980s if one includes both legal and illegal immigrants (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1989). The influx of immigrants has raised questions about the progress in schooling of immigrants and immigrants' children, groups making up large shares of the school populations in some areas of the country.

Studies of the educational attainment of immigrant students and children of immigrants have produced mixed results (see, e.g., Bennett & LeCompte, 1990; Cohen, 1970; Gibson 1987a; Ogbu, 1987a; Ravitch, 1974; Tyack, 1974). First-generation immigrant students (those born in other countries) have in some situations excelled in achievement in comparison with native-born white populations (see, e.g., Gibson, 1988; Glazer, 1977) and sometimes lagged behind (Gambino, 1977; Krickus, 1977; Ravitch, 1974).

There has been some ethnic variation in performance patterns. A number of studies comparing Asians, whites, and Hispanics have found that Asian attainment is considerably higher than that of any other students (Matute-Bianchi, 1986; Orfield, 1986). Studies separating out students by generation of residence in the United States find that the differences become most dramatic in the children of immigrant generation (Rong & Grant, 1990). Similar patterns can be found for the economic achievement of many immigrant groups (Lieberson, 1980; Model, 1988).

Educational Attainment of Children of Immigrants

Less sustained attention has been focused on children of immigrants: students born in the United States but having one or two parents born in another country. The remarkable success in schooling of certain ethnic

groups, for example Asian students, has been noted by researchers (Hirschman & Wong, 1986; Lee & Rong, 1988). Hirschman and Wong found that second-generation Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino students generally attained more years of schooling than native-born, non-Asian students. The patterns of attainment and educational advancement varied across these three groups somewhat, reflecting different patterns of selection of immigrants and settlement in the United States. Our recent studies comparing Hispanic, Asian and non-Hispanic whites interviewed by the U.S. Census Bureau in 1979 showed that white students in the children of immigrant generation outattained those in the immigrant generation and in generations where neither students nor parents had been immigrants (Rong & Grant, 1990). Asian students also made rapid gains in attainment in the children of immigrant group, gains that leveled off between the children of immigrant and the next generation. Only Hispanic students increased attainment markedly in the children to immigrant to native-born with two native-born parents generation.

But how typical are the attainment patterns of children of immigrants reported in some studies? This paper attempts to address that question by using census data to compare the educational attainment throught the compulsory schooling years two groups: children of immigrants and native-born children with U.S.-born parents for a 90-period, 1890-1980. For ease of reference, we refer to the first group as children of immigrants and the latter as natives.

Unfortunately, the U.S. Census has not collected data on birthplace of parents for nonwhite populations, so this group cannot be included in these comparisons. Furthermore, it was not until 1950 that the U.S. Census

Bureau created a specific classification for Hispanic, or Spanish-surnamed, individuals. Previously, Hispanics were classified by race alone (usually as caucasians). Thus, it is also impossible to separate out ethnic groups in historical comparisons. In some years and for some measures, no distinction was made in Census data between persons with one and persons with two foreign-born parents. For purposes of this analysis, individuals with one or more foreign-born parent have been classified as children of immigrants.

Theoretical Issues

A number of theories have been developed to explain performance and attainment of children of immigrants in schools. Most have focused primarily on first-generation immigrants, although some also address the situation of children of immigrants (Gibson, 1988; Hill, 1906; Ogbu, 1974; Neidert & Farley, 1985; Matute-Bianchi, 1986).

Cultural discontinuity theories suggest that children of immigrants might do poorly in schools in comparison with native-born Caucasians, even if immigrants' children perform considerably better than students who themselves are immigrants (see Gibson, 1988, for a review). Students who live in tightknit ethnic enclaves, in particular, might experience sharp language and cultural barriers between home and school. Parents, whose English-language skills often are poorer than those of their children, cannot intervene effectively in schools on behalf of their children (Ravitz, 1974).

Some immigrant parents might envision schools and educational attainment as mechanisms drawing children away from families and distinctive ethnic cultures and thus construct conscious or nonconscious

barriers to these students' high attainment in schools (Dornbusch, quoted in Butterworth, 1990; Gibson, 1988). Social discrimination in and out of school might be stressful for students and diminishing of their academic performance. Lower incomes of some immigrant families, in comparison with families where all members are native-born, might pressure children of immigrants to leave school early (Bennett & LeCompte, 1985).

In contrast, there are reasons to expect high educational attainment among children of immigrants. Many nonrefugee immigrant parents came to the United States in part in search for better educational opportunities for their children (Garcia, 1985; Gibson, 1987a, 1987b, 1988; Ogbu, 1987a, 1987b). They thus encourage educational success in children. Although children of immigrants living in nonaffluent neighborhoods might attend schools inferior to those serving middle-class white communities, parents evaluate them favorably compared with schooling opportunities available to their children in their country of origin (Ogbu, 1987; Suarez-Orozco, 1987).

Because of restrictive immigrant laws at certain points in history toward various immigrant groups, parents who have immigrated have been more highly educated than comparable-aged native populations. Even if the immigrant parents are underemployed in relation to their education and skills, they nevertheless encourage their children to match or exceed their own level of education. This applies to some, but not all, immigrant groups (e.g., Japanese or Filipino immigrants in the 1040s and 1950s, or Cubans in later eras. See Hirschman & Wong, 1986; Pedraza-Bailey, 1985).

Bonacich (1973) has argued that some ethnic groups have become successful in America by developing "middleman" economies that fill niches

in the economy of the host culture. The involvement of the Japanese in flower and vegetable growing in California prior to World War II is an example of such a strategy (Lee & Rong, 1988). These strategies have often allowed for rapid upward economic mobility for some groups, even when they continue to experience considerable social discrimination. Parents invest in education of their children so that the children can expand businesses by running them more efficiently (Gibson, 1988).

Finally, some writers have argued that social discrimination might not always have negative consequences for the educational attainment of immigrant children, although it undoubtedly affects their emotional life and satisfaction with schools (Dornbusch, quoted in Butterworth 1990; Ravitch, 1977). Gibson (1988), who studied Sikh students in a rural California school system, found that these students performed better than native-born white and native-born and immigrant Hispanic populations. Despite high academic performance, Sikh children were reluctant to join nonacademic extracurricular activities. Some of the reluctance stemmed from fears of social discrimination in such activities, but some was traceable to parents' resistance to their children's involvement in quasi-social activities stressing cultural values inconsistent with those of the parents (e.g., dating among teenagers). Sikh parents usually were less-affluent than native-born Caucasian parents and could less afford financial costs of some extracurricular activities or could less afford to spare students from domestic or part-time paid work to participate. Lack of participation in extracurricular activities meant a stronger focus on academic endeavors for Sikh students.

Theoretical statements to date do not lead us to a clear prediction

of the educational performance for children of immigrants. On the one hand, their school performance and attainment might lag behind that of native-born Caucasians, whose culture typically dominates most school systems. Language and cultural barriers, and social discrimination, might impede their progress. On the other hand, selectivity of immigrants, relatively positive valuation of schools by parents (Stevenson, 1988), explicit parental investment in children's educational attainment (Chen & Stevenson, 1989), and children's minimal involvement in activities that might distract from educational attainment might encourage children of immigrants to persist and perform well in school.

Focus of This Study

To examine the academic attainment of second-generation immigrant students, we compared enrollment, attainment, and acceleration/retention rates of children of immigrants and children of native-born parents for a 90 year period, 1890 to 1980. The first author compiled Census data on Caucasian students from 1900 to 1980. (As noted above, data on country of birth for non-Caucasian youth unfortunately were not available through Census data.) Data from 1900 to 1970 were drawn from published census data.[1] Data for 1980 were drawn from the Public Use datatape based on a subsample of 160.004 cases.[2]

Before proceeding further, it is important to note that over this period there were some variations in the data collected and the categorizations used by the U.S. Census. For example, in 1900 and 1920 data were collected on illiteracy rates of native-born Caucasian and second-generation immigrants. These data were not collected after 1920, owing to relatively low illiteracy rates. Prior to 1950, Spanish-surnamed

individuals were included in tabulations of Caucasians with foreign-born or native-born parents. After 1950, this group was considered a separate category and was not included in tabulations of Caucasians. (Notably, Spanish-surnamed individuals made up a small proportion of documented first and second-generation immigrants prior to 1950.) Data reported here reflect U.S. Census Bureau practices on classification of Spanish-surnamed individuals.

School Enrollments

Table 1 reports percentages of school enrollments through the compulsory school ages for natives and for children of immigrants. The age categories shift slightly for various time periods, reflecting shifts in compulsory attendance ages and changes in Census classification categories.

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Table 1 shows that in all periods, the school enrollment of children of immigrants exceeded that of natives, although the separation between these groups diminished by 1970 in comparison with 1900. Comparisons of dropout rates for the two groups in 1980 suggest a similar pattern of higher enrollments for children of immigrants. Of students aged 16-19 in 1980, 16.1 percent of those with two native-born parents, but only 10.8 percent of those with one or more foreign-born parents, were not enrolled in some form of schooling (U.S. Census Public Use Tape, 1981).

Educational Attainment Measures

Table 2 reports data on grade-level attainment rates in 1950, 1970, and 1980 for young adult ages 14-24 who are children of immigrants and natives. Looking first at persons over age 14 with relatively little schooling (less than five years for years 1950 and 1970 and less than nine

years for the year 1980)[3], we find that rates are similar for the two groups but slightly more favorable for children of immigrants in comparison with whites with two native-born parents. Youth with at least one foreign-born parent show higher attainment at the high school, college, and postgraduate levels, with gaps increasing over time and at higher levels of the educational spectrum. In 1950, for example, college graduation rates among the two groups for persons ages 18-24 were similar: 3.4 percent for natives and 3.9 percent for children of immigrants.

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

By 1980, the gap had widened, with 12.1 percent of the former but 15.5 percent of the latter groups having graduated from college. The gaps are even greater at the postgraduate level, although proportions of both groups completing this much education are relatively small (e.g., 3.4 percent of natives and 7.0 percent of children of immigrants.)

TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

Table 3 shows proportions of school-enrolled youth over 18 who are in postsecondary, rather than secondary, schooling for 1970. Again, the data reveal more favorable attainment rates for children of immigrants rather than natives. For ages 18-24, 81.3% of children of immigrants as compared with 75.2 percent of natives who are enrolled are at a college level. For youths aged 22 to 24, 9.5 percent of enrolled children of immigrants are in graduate school, while only 7.8 percent of students with two native-born parents are at this level. These data, based on Caucasian immigrants of many ethnic/country of origin backgrounds, are consistent with patterns reported recently for Asian (Hirschman & Wong, 1986) and Indian (Gibson, 1987a, 1988) immigrant groups.

Acceleration/Retention Rates

Acceleration and retention rates provide an indirect measure of quality of educational performance, although these (especially retention rates) are not perfect measures. Students can be retained for excessive absences, behavioral nonconformity, or social immaturity. Acceleration, in contrast, is likely to represent superior academic performance, perhaps in combination with conforming behavior.

TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE

Table 4 shows acceleration and retention rates for the two groups in 1950 and in 1970. These data are reported for students in the compulsory-attendance age levels in each of these periods (to age 13 in 1950 and to age 17 in 1970). Students classified as retained are one to two years above the mean age for students enrolled in that grade for the state in which they are enrolled. Students classified as accelerated are one or more years younger than the mean age for persons enrolled in that grade.

Table 4 shows higher acceleration rates for children of immigrants in comparison with natives. The absolute proportion of students who were accelerated increased from 1950 to 1970, but at both periods children of immigrants were more likely to be accelerated in grade level than were natives, suggesting higher proportions of superior-achieving students among immigrants' children.

Table 4 also shows that children of immigrants had lower retention rates than white natives. However, gaps in retention rates between the two groups are smaller than gaps in acceleration rates.

Discussion

The data we have reported suggest that high attainment and

achievement of children of immigrants as compared with native white populations has been a general phenomenon observable over several decades. Although high attainment and achievement among all white immigrant groups has not been uniform (Gambino, 1977, Ravitch, 1974), the overall trend clearly has been toward greater attainment and higher performance for children of immigrants than for natives. Our findings suggest that the extraordinarily high attainment noted for some immigrant groups, for example Asians (Hirshmann & Wong, 1986), Sikh Indians (Gibson, 1988) or Jews (Glazer, 1977; Ravitz, 1974), are by no means anomalies. Rather, higher attainment of children of immigrants (and sometimes also children who themselves are immigrants; see Stevenson, 1988) is the modal historical pattern demonstrated consistently through several decades. The persistence over decades attests to the stability of this pattern.

The cross-sectional census data do not lend themselves to a definitive test of competing theories of educational attainment and immigration. The patterns we observe cast doubt on cultural discontinuity explanations. Children of immigrants (or perhaps more so their less-acculturated parents) might experience discontinuities with school environments, but these problems do not seem to translate into attainment deficits. The effects might be more social than academic in nature. This question deserves attention in future research.

We also must be cautious about generalizing patterns observed for Caucasian students to nonwhite immigrants who enter American schools. Nonwhite students, and their families, might experience more overt, racist-based hostilities that lead to the formation of what Ogbu (1987) terms an "oppositional" or "resistant" culture that leads students to nonconformity

with school rules and other behaviors associated with academic success (see also D'Amato, 1987). Ogbu, however, believes oppositional cultures are more likely to evolve among domestic minorities who do not perceive of themselves as "guests" in a host country and who do not compare schooling and social mobility opportunities available to them with opportunities available in a homeland.

It is also important to be aware that within broad categories of ethnic groups, attainment of subgroups has varied substantially (Bennett & LeCompte, 1990; Hirschman & Wong, 1986; Pedraza-Bailey, 1985). The historical circumstances under which immigrants come to this country, their human capital attainment prior to immigration, and their economic opportunities in this country undoubtedly affect schooling outcomes for their children. The Census data do not provide information relevant for examining such questions, but they are important ones for future research.

Since the U.S. Census in 1990 will not collect data on birthplace of parents of any U.S. residents, it will be impossible to use this source to test whether patterns observed for white children of immigrants also hold for nonwhite immigrants. Such a test will require survey research that gathers the relevant information, probably for a more restricted sample.

It is interesting to note that, although data are quite consistent, educators and the public seem not to be aware that high levels of educational attainment have been characteristic of children of immigrants for several generations. Educators, for example, tend to expect problems in schools or districts with high enrollments of students with foreign-born parents. There may well be problems of social discrimination in such environments, but our data do not support a conclusion that expectations of

educational attainment problems are warranted, especially with reference to a children of immigrant group. As Gibson (1988) and others have noted, the scenario for first-generation immigrants is more mixed, but in some cases even these students display superior attainment and achievement in comparison to native-born whites.

The misperception of educational attainment of immigrant minorities had led to inappropriate educational policies (e.g., the expectation that these groups uniformly will shown educational deficits that must be corrected by school systems) and flawed research that has attempted to explain only the failures but not the successes of immigrant groups (see, e.g., D'Amato, 1987; Ogbu, 1987a).

Some cautions are in order. Because of data limitations, we were able to study only Caucasian children of immigrants immigrants. Non-Caucasian groups might have a different experience. Our recent study using 1979 census survey data suggest that patterns for Asians appear to parallel those for whites (although Asians out-attain whites slightly in all generations), but Hispanics continue to improve attainment over the children of immigrant generation into the next generation. It is likely that patterns differ in pace, and perhaps also form, across ethnic group.

We also were unable to explore a number of contextual factors that might have resulted in differential attainment rates for various ethnic, gender, and socioeconomic groups. There is a need for research on these topics, as many studies have suggested that effects of immigration on educational and socioeconomic attainment varies significantly by these factors (Lee, 1988; McKenna & Ortiz, 1988; Pedraza-Bailey, 1985).

Since we do not have longitudinal or contextual data, we also cannot

pose tests of various theoretical statements of why children of immigrants might show such high school attainment rates. But the demonstration of high school attainment rates of immigrants' children over several decades might in itself come as a surprise to some policy makers and educators who view large proportions of students with foreign parentage as problematic for school systems and for attainment and achievement rates. At the same time, it is important to realize that although most children of immigrants have done well in schools, there are groups who deviate from overall patterns and need special attention. Bennett & LeCompte (1990) note that although most Asians have done well in schools, the Hmong overall have performed poorly. Hirschman & Wong (1986) find that Filipinos have lower attainment rates through several generations than do other Asian groups.

The findings also suggest some useful strategies for coping with the influx of immigrants. First, dissemination of knowledge that an influx of immigrants into schools is not likely to depress attainment might be reassuring to school personnel and community members. Second, the school success strategies of children of immigrants might be studied more fully and emulated by other groups. Third, schools might explicitly pair newly arrived immigrant children with children whose parents were immigrants from similar regions.

School attainment and achievement, however, are not the only relevant concerns about schooling of immigrants and children of immigrants. Students spend numerous hours in schools, and schooling environments serve as important agencies of socialization. Numerous first person accounts and ethnographic studies (e.g., Gibson, 1988; Harwood, 1986; Nhiem & Halpern, 1989) suggest that immigrants and immigrants' children face social

discrimination and hostility in schools. Furthermore, certain groups have been targeted for particular hostility, for example, Hispanics who have faced explicit attempts to bar illegal immigrants and children of illegal immigrants from schools (Chase, 1985) and Asians who have faced restrictive quotas at some of the nation's most elite universities (Hacker 1989; Wang, 1988). Perhaps the knowledge that most children of immigrant groups do well in schooling can encourage educators to spend more time developing programs and policies to ease social discrimination against these groups in schools and society.

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Notes

1. Data were from the U.S. Census, Supplementary Analysis, 1900; U.S. Census of 1920; Pe5B, U.S. Census of 1950 and PC(2)-%A and %b; U.S. census of 1970.

2. Source is U.S. Bureau of the Census (1981). Current Population Survey: Public Use Tape File, Nov. 1979.

3. The cutoff point for the 1980 group was raised to 9 years of schooling to provide a meaningful number of cases for comparison, since 1980 data are based on a smaller sample of 160,000, rather than a full census.

Table 1

School Enrollment Rates of Compulsory-attendance* Aged White Children with Native-born and Foreign-born Parents**, 1900-1970,

	Native Whites with Two Native-Born Parents	Native Whites with One or More Foreign-Born Parents
1900 (ages 5-14)	65.3 %	71.6 %
1920 (ages 5-13)	80.1 %	82.7 %
1950 (ages 5-13)	82.4 %	85.2 %
1970 (ages 5-17)	92.6 %	93.5 %

* Compulsory attendance ages vary by states and decades. Requirements for certain time periods are estimated from data on state laws and other relevant information given in census volumes (See page 1041-1045 in Census of 1920, Vol II; Pp.1092-1094 in Census of 1930 Vol II, Pp.4-7 in Pe 5B of Census of 1950, and Pp VIII-X in Pc(2)-5A of Census of 1970). Enrollment data for 1900 were classified into four age groups, 5-9, 10-14, 15-17 and 18-20, therefore it can not be put the age range in consensus with data of 1920 and 1950. The school enrollment data are not available on the Public Use Tape (1981).

**Spanish-surnamed persons were included as Caucasians prior to 1950. In 1950 such persons were categorized separately and are not included as native whites; data excluding the Mexican-Born in 1970 and excluding persons reported as Hispanics in 1980. As of 1950, Spanish-surnamed persons constituted less than 2% of the population. (United States Census. 1950. Special Reports: Education. Table 2 & Table 5. p. 5B-26).

Source: Data from U.S. Census, Supplementary Analysis, 1900: Population, Volume II: General Report and Analytical Tables, U.S. Census of 1920; Pe 5B, U.S. Census of 1950 and Pc(2)-5A & 5B, U.S. Census of 1970; U.S Bureau of Census (1981) Current Population Survey: Public Use Tape File.

Table 2

Educational Attainment Levels of White Youths Age 14-24 with Native-born and Foreign-born Parents*, 1950-1980, by Percentage.

	Native-Born Whites with Two Native-Born Parents	Native-Born Whites with One or More Foreign-Born Parents
Less than 5 years schooling (ages 14-24)		
1950	4.4 %	3.9 %
1970	1.1 %	1.0 %
Less than 9 years schooling**		
1980	3.2 %	2.8 %
High school graduates (ages 14-24)		
1950	34.7 %	42.6 %
1970	44.7 %	52.5 %
1980	62.9 %	66.6 %
College graduates (ages 18-24)		
1950	3.4 %	3.9 %
1970	6.4 %	7.8 %
1980	12.1 %	15.5 %
5 years or more college (ages 20-24)***		
1970	1.8 %	3.5 %
1980	3.4 %	7.0 %

*Data exclude Spanish-surnamed individuals in 1950, the Mexican-born in 1970, persons reported as Hispanics in 1980

** Eight years of schooling was the lowest educational attainment specified by the 1980 census.

*** The highest educational level recorded in the 1950 census was persons with 4 or more years of college.

Source: Data from U.S. Census, Supplementary Analysis, 1900; Population, Volume II: General Report and Analytical Tables, U.S. Census of 1920; Pe 5B, U.S. Census of 1950 and Pc(2)-5A & 5B, U.S. Census of 1970; U.S Bureau of Census (1981) Current Population Survey: Public Use Tape File.

Table 3

Postsecondary-level Enrollment as a Proportion of All School Enrollment for White Youth with Native-Born and Foreign-born Parents**, 1970.

	Native Whites with Two Native-Born Parents	Native Whites with One or More Foreign-Born Parents
In college (ages 18-24)	75.2 %	81.3 %
In graduate school (ages 22-24)	7.8 %	9.5 %

* Data excluding the Mexican-Born.

** This category includes persons with one or more foreign-born parents

Source: U.S. Census Bureau. Pc(2)-5A, Census of 1970.

Table 4

Acceleration Rates (Above Grade-Level for Age) and Retention Rates (Below Grade-Level for Age) ** for White School Children with Native-born and Foreign-born Parents, 1950 and 1970, by Percentage.

	Native-Born Whites with Two Native-Born Parents	Native-Born White with One or More Foreign-Born Parents*
Acceleration rates		
1950 (ages 5-13)***		
1 year above modal for age	4.4 %	6.9 %
2+ yr above modal for age	0.5 %	1.0 %
1970 (ages 5-17)		
1+ yr above modal for age	10.1 %	13.0 %
Retention rates		
1950 (ages 5-13)***		
1 years below modal for age	43.6 %	37.1 %
2+ yr below modal for age	12.9 %	11.6 %
1970 (ages 5-17)		
1+ yr below modal for age	23.2 %	22.2 %

* These data exclude persons with Spanish surnames in 1950 and the Mexican-born in 1970.

**Six years old for first grade is defined as the modal age. The table for acceleration and retention is on page IX, School Enrollment, U.S.Census of 1970.

*** Enrollment data for 1950 is only available for ages 5-13.

Source: Data from U.S. Census, Supplementary Analysis, 1900; Population, Volume II: General Report and Analytical Tables, U.S. Census of 1920; Pe 5B, U.S. Census of 1950 and Pc(2)-5A & 5B, U.S. Census of 1970; U.S Bureau of Census (1981) Current Population Survey: Public Use Tape File, Nov 1979.